



APPG inquiry into levelling up

Summary notes from Session 3: Levelling up communities

Restoring a sense of community, local pride and belonging, especially in those places where it has been lost

Date: Wednesday 30th November

Time: 3.00pm – 5.00pm

Venue: Room C, 1 Parliament St

APPG members present: Paul Howell MP, Sharon Hodgson MP, Baroness Thornhill MBE, Jack Brereton MP, Lord Hodgson of Astley Abbotts CBE, Mary Kelly Foy MP, Jo Gideon MP

Secretariat: Daniel Crowe and Tilly Steward, Local Trust

The APPG's inquiry seeks to assess the extent to which the Levelling Up White Paper's policy programme aligns with the needs and aspirations of people who live in those communities identified as 'left behind'. In the third session of the inquiry, jointly chaired by Paul Howell MP and Sharon Hodgson MP, the APPG heard evidence from four expert witnesses across the White Paper's missions on housing, crime and pride in place.

Focus area	Mission
	<i>Restoring a sense of community, local pride and belonging, especially in those places where it has been lost</i>
Pride in place	Mission 9: By 2030, pride in place, such as people's satisfaction with their town centre and engagement in local culture and community, will have risen in every area of the UK, with the gap between top performing and other areas closing.
Housing	Mission 10: By 2030, renters will have a secure path to ownership with the number of first-time buyers increasing in all areas; and the government's ambition is for the number of non-decent rented homes to have fallen by 50%, with the biggest improvements in the lowest-performing areas.
Crime	Mission 11: By 2030, homicide, serious violence and neighbourhood crime will have fallen, focused on the worst-affected areas.

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Expert witnesses

- Toby Lloyd, housing and regeneration policy expert and Chair of the 2020-21 No Place Left Behind Commission
- Professor Sarah Pearson, Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research, Sheffield Hallam University
- Ben Lee, Director, Shared Intelligence, formerly National Association for Neighbourhood Management
- Angie Buss, Chair, Blackpool Revue Big Local

Witnesses brought a range of expertise to the session from across policy implementation and evaluation, as well as neighbourhood management and resident-led activities.

Resident involvement in community regeneration

Evaluation of previous regeneration initiatives in the United Kingdom has found strong evidence supporting resident participation across policy areas such as housing, crime and pride in place, with the most transformative improvements in neighbourhoods accompanied by meaningful community involvement.

There is also a strong link between effective community regeneration and pride in place, which can be seen in improvements in how people feel about their local area. This also has knock-on benefits in other spheres, including positive health outcomes resulting from improvements in housing or the local physical environment. Evaluation of the New Deal for Communities programme has shown that residents feeling more positive about their neighbourhood had a subsequent, positive impact on their mental health.

Parliamentarians also heard evidence from witnesses on the complex relationship between crime levels, perceptions of safety and attitudes towards the local neighbourhood overall – with people who have been victims of crime being, on average, less satisfied with the areas in which they live. Living in a “degraded environment” in which there are weak relationships between neighbours and the local community can heighten people’s perception of risk, a phenomenon particularly felt by older people and women.

Housing quality and development

Poor housing quality in the private rented sector was identified by witnesses as an issue with strong relevance for levelling up and ‘left behind’ neighbourhoods. One witness argued that the current system favoured private landlords rather than tenants, with “sticks as well as carrots” required to tackle this problem.

A parliamentarian noted examples of very poor accommodation that also exist as part of housing association-managed properties. Constrained budgets for repairing or retrofitting homes was offered as a contributor to this situation. In general, government housing policy and funding has been skewed towards new-build properties at the expense of improving existing housing stock. A recommendation was made to re-allocate any underspend in the affordable housing budget to social housing providers for repairs and decarbonisation projects.

Discussion turned to the issue of housing development in ‘left behind’ neighbourhoods, with one APPG member questioning whether a desire to have more houses built in the style of existing housing stock created a prohibitive cost for developers. Witnesses suggested this was not the case, with housing developers sometimes overstating the impact given construction costs are generally a relatively small portion of total development costs. There was general consensus that improving existing housing quality should be the priority for ‘left behind’ neighbourhoods.

The character of public spaces

Members agreed that the physical environment of a neighbourhood has a significant impact on feelings of satisfaction and on overall quality of life. In an era of constrained funding for local authorities, the maintenance and upkeep of assets such as public buildings and green spaces have often been identified as areas for savings. Certain services need to be prioritised at the expense of others, with some councils having to “choose between grass-cutting and social care.” The impact of these decisions can sometimes take multiple years to become apparent, particularly in relation to the overall feeling or character of a community. ‘Left behind’ neighbourhoods in particular have experienced a ‘stripping out’ of assets like community centres, libraries, shops and cultural facilities. Activities such as community tree planting can be a relatively cost and time efficient method for increasing engagement and feelings of empowerment around improving the local area.

One parliamentarian asked about the importance of maintaining – or restoring – ‘bustling high streets’. This raised the example from a witness of the managed decline of community assets, including one “left to rot on the high street for 30 years” due to a cycle of owners and planning permissions – indicative of the way in which the planning system can sometimes work in the financial interest of landlords but against the broader interests of the community. The Community Right to Bid on assets of community value was identified as a key mechanism for communities to have a greater say in the character of their local area and to take control of assets such as local pubs or shops. However, the benefits of this reform are still yet to be seen on a large scale, and are much more difficult to achieve in ‘left behind’ areas with lower levels of community capacity. This capacity first needs to be built. This emphasises the value and importance of the proposal for a Community Wealth Fund funded from dormant assets.

Role of Local Authorities

Local Authorities can be pulled in different directions in place-based and high street regeneration. Reducing car traffic and making high streets more attractive for pedestrians or cyclists can rejuvenate them, yet these efforts are regularly confronted with strong opposition from groups of local residents.

At lower levels of local government, such as parish councils, bureaucracy and access to funds can be a barrier to initiating schemes that are appropriately tailored to local conditions. Witnesses also had mixed views on whether councils enabled or constrained resident-led projects. Some councils were felt to be resistant to allowing communities to run projects themselves, while one witness was able to outline her experience of having a supportive council that created an enabling environment for resident-led initiatives.

Community-led initiatives

As in previous inquiry sessions, there was broad consensus amongst the expert panel that empowering communities was essential to effective regeneration efforts. This rests on the unique place and relationships that local residents hold within their own communities. A witness involved in Blackpool Revue Big Local explained how their model of outreach differed to those provided by statutory services or local council officers: “we’re residents ... these people are our neighbours, we live next door to them, we know their kids.” Members of the resident-led partnership regularly go door-knocking to get a sense of local issues and challenges and ensure their activities meet the needs of the local community. This has included creating a community garden, a jobs club, social groups, youth activities and providing food parcels.

In addition to physical infrastructure, investment in social infrastructure is required to maximise the benefits of community initiatives and develop local capacity, deploy resources and develop skills. Effective partnership working between different groups – from community leaders, public services and residents themselves can also help projects have the most impact. Professional or resourced support for volunteer-led groups is also highly beneficial and works best when deployed to help deliver locally-agreed priorities.

Capital versus revenue funding

Funding to support community regeneration – across successive governments – has not always allowed for 'local innovation'. This is reflected in the comparatively larger sums of money set aside for capital projects, with greater difficulty in securing revenue funding to be spent on staff or engagement.

This can lead to a mismatch between capital projects and the needs of the community. One example was given of a community hub built in East London, which, despite having top notch facilities, has ended up being used as additional office space for the council following insufficient community input on their needs and how it would be used. In stark contrast was another example of a community group that had mobilised around the need for better end-of-life care in the local area, and had worked to repurpose existing premises to meet this lack of provision. More joined up thinking on capital and revenue spending is required to achieve better outcomes for communities, as well as broader metrics for evaluating the 'success' of levelling up projects and priorities.

Future funding of community-led regeneration

Communities require a degree of flexibility in funding and spending decisions if they are to meet and adapt to the specific needs of their areas. The Big Local model was cited as an example of more flexible funding for residents that retains accountability mechanisms and appropriate support for residents. However, the funding and time horizon of Big Local is finite and existing resident-led partnerships will need to attract additional resources to continue their activities past the programme's completion.

The need to bid for competitive funds can be an impediment as communities are required to bid against a prescribed set of outcomes that do not necessarily align with local need. Similarly, those groups with the greatest capacity to draft and submit grant applications might not necessarily be those who are best placed to deliver projects. The group discussed the current proposal for a Community Wealth Fund which has been supported by members of the APPG, including throughout the passage of the Dormant Assets Act 2022. The Community Wealth Fund was named as a potential new cause as part of the expanded dormant assets scheme in a public consultation over the summer, with a decision from the government due in early 2023.